

Transcription: Harry Flegle

Today is Friday, November 5th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree. Today I'll be interviewing Mr. Harry Flegle, and Mr. Flegle is at his home in Mineral Wells, Texas, and I am at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board, Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us. I guess the best place to start is just to ask you to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

Harry Flegle: I was born and raised in St. Louis, and then we moved out to the country in the little town of Highridge, Missouri, and it was a little town. Today it's unbelievable how big it is. I went to Northwest High School there, did all sports and football, basketball, track. Then I joined the Marine Corps. Of course I was too young to go and my dad had to sign for me to get in. I joined the Marine Corps while I was still in high school.

What was it that drew you to sign up for the Marines?

Harry Flegle: I had kind of a rough childhood. I had a stepmother. I never knew who my real mother was and I didn't get along with my stepmother, and I just wanted to leave. A lot of work. We never had, we never celebrated Christmas or birthdays or any holidays. We just worked all the time.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Harry Flegle: I got one brother, one natural brother, and he did the same thing I did. He left when he graduated high school two years after I did, and he joined the Navy and stayed in the Navy for 32 or 33 years. He retired as a Master Chief.

That's a long career. That's great.

Harry Flegle: In '96, he retired in 1996.

Was there anything in particular that drew you to the Marine Corps?

Harry Flegle: I don't know really. I just liked the Marine Corps. To me, they were one of the best of the military services in my opinion at that time, and I was 16 when I went in the Marine Corps, and when I turned 18 I had to get out early because when you sign for the Marine Corps, four-year hitch, well I got out early because my stepmother got me that I didn't know about a hardship discharge because my father died of bone cancer, and once he was gone and I tried to go back to the Marine Corps and they wouldn't take me. Then they never would tell me why.

What year was this sir?

Harry Flegle: That was in '67.

So it was during the Vietnam War.

Harry Flegle: Oh yeah, the Vietnam War was going pretty good. So about 30 days after I tried to get back into the Marine Corps, Uncle Sam decided I'll just draft him. So the Army drafted

me, which I didn't care, I wasn't married at the time and didn't have a job, so I went into the Army. I didn't have to go through Army basic or nothing because I was already prior service.

That's good.

Harry Flegle: And my thing in Marine Corps, I was with the Second Recon Battalion, and the Army thought they could use me to ask me what I did the best – well my specialty was small arms and explosives, so I taught demolition at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, and I said well, I'm not going to have to go back to Vietnam again, am I? He said no. Well, that was a big fib. 30 days later I was back in Vietnam.

So you had been to Vietnam once.

Harry Flegle: I was there for 3 years.

You had already been there with the Marine Corps though?

Harry Flegle: Yes.

How long were you in Vietnam with the Marines?

Harry Flegle: 11 months.

And you were 17 years old?

Harry Flegle: Yeah. You know, the hardest part about it even when well, I was 17, almost 18 when the Army drafted me, and I went back over there and the only thing, I was with the 5th Special Forces and I was attached to the 25th Infantry Division, Second in the 14th Infantry, and also worked with Second 27th Wolfhounds, and I did a lot of work with Macsog, but I can't tell you about that because some of that stuff is still classified. I don't really want to talk about that part anyway. It was nasty.

What was it like for you to go back a second time? It was not something you wanted to do, right?

Harry Flegle: Well, for country, yes. Now my father, if you even said anything about the American flag derogatory or not good, you better look out because he was fixin' to knock your head off. He fought in World War II and the Korean War. So he's buried in a national cemetery at Jefferson Barracks in Missouri. So I bounced around between them two. I liked the Army. I re-enlisted and stayed in. Well, when I came home after my Vietnam time, I got married and of course my wife didn't like the military. She didn't like moving around. So I said well I'll make you a deal. I said if I get out, I'm going to join the Reserves. That way I'm still in the military and it's working towards a retirement. Well, I couldn't retire from the military because some of the wounds that I got, they wouldn't let me stay to retire because I couldn't do the qualified physical fitness things that you have to do to stay in. So in '86 they discharged me permanently.

So you were in basically from '67 -

Harry Flegle: 22 years, 23 years, yeah.

What rank were you when you got out?

Harry Flegle: When I got out, I was a Staff Sergeant. But the highest rank I achieved was Second Lieutenant.

OK, tell us a little bit about that.

Harry Flegle: I got a field permission, I don't know what it was, I never really knew any of our platoon leaders' names because they never lasted long. I don't know why. I guess God decided that we needed a new one. So I got a field permission. The Second Lieutenant is the platoon leader, and then in order to keep it, you have to keep it for 180 days, and I only kept it for 178. Well, you know what happens then. There's no record of it. I mean you just go back to your normal rank.

So you were a platoon commander in Vietnam.

Harry Flegle: Yeah, my last, about the end of '69, somewhere around there. I told you what all I got. Do you need to hear all that?

No sir, whatever you want to talk about. I'm just trying to get any of your memories or recollections that you would want future generations to hear for posterity, that sort of thing.

Harry Flegle: The only reason that he wanted me to do it, I had a lot of bad, they call it PTSD, I had a lot of bad dreams for I guess the first 5 or 6 years after, I mean bad. I almost shot my wife twice, almost strangled her once, and she's a tough woman. She hung in there. We've been married a little over 46 years.

That's great.

Harry Flegle: Oh yeah, she ain't goin' nowhere. Of course they say a man wears the pants in the house, he's the boss? Not here.

I think a lot of people joke about the wife being the commander in chief of the home.

Harry Flegle: When mama's not happy, nobody's happy. Trust me. And I've got 9 grandkids and 3 great grandkids. The worst part about it was General Westmoreland, this is just my understanding, I don't know if it actually happened or not. Well, I never got it anyway, so apparently it didn't happen, put me in for a Medal of Honor, but I didn't get it. But I wasn't there to hunt medals anyway. I just had a job to do just like everybody else, and then I noticed I've been a member of the VFW for over 40 years, and all I hear about is well, if you're not a combat vet, you ain't nuthin'. Well, I got news for them people that think like that.

I agree.

Harry Flegle: You may have been a combat vet, but if you don't have cooks, you don't have supply people, you don't have S-4, your intelligence or none of that stuff, you can't do your job unless they get it to you. What are you gonna do if you're out in the middle of a field and you're in a conflict with somebody, and you run out of ammunition? Where is it coming from?

Also I think regardless of your MOS, where you go in your service, I mean anybody that's served knows this, it's dictated from higher. So you could be an infantryman who never set foot in a conflict or you might have been deployed numerous times and it's above your pay grade type of thing.

Harry Flegle: Well, I know in the Marine Corps they test you. The Army does, too. You are put in the job that they feel you are suited for. I guess they figured I was suited to be a combat vet. Well, having a rough childhood, I was pretty stout, strong, and when I was going through basic, my DI, of course they can't do that today no more, I guess some of the mothers get a little upset because they are treating their sons badly, well he used to beat the tar out of me every day. I had another word for it, but... and I mean daily. Well, I'm 6'6", and when I went in I weighed 386 pounds, and he thought I was fat.

How much did you weigh?

Harry Flegle: 386 pounds.

OK, yeah.

Harry Flegle: I'm a pretty big fella. I'm still a pretty big fella, old but big. They put me on what back then they called it the pork chops squad. They didn't give me enough to keep a bird alive. But we went with it and the only thing about it is I had to drink water all the time. I was always thirsty, and so it come time and they weighed me again, I didn't lose weight. I gained weight. He said how can you gain weight? So they took me in San Diego to Naval Base. Of course you know the Marine Corps doesn't have doctors, they don't have medics. All their medics are Naval personnel. And so he took me over to the Naval hospital, and when the doctor came out and talked to him, he says you got this man on a weight restricted diet? And he said yes sir. He says does he drink a lot of water? He says by the gallon. He said well there ain't no reason why. He's only got 2 percent body fat and he's dehydrating. So they took me off pork squad. I mean there wasn't no fat on me at all. It was all muscle. I'm not bragging, but I was pretty strong. Even here in Mineral Wells when I came back home, I went to work for Halliburton and I used to pick stuff up, engine blocks and they worked on compressors and stuff. I'd take the heads of the compressors and pick them up and set them on the table. One of my bosses used to tell me you know, we got cranes around here for that stuff. I said well, they're busy and I ain't got time to wait for 'em and this has to get out, so it just came natural to me.

You said you were 6'6" and 386 pounds?

Harry Flegle: When I went in the Marine Corps, yeah.

That's really, that's big.

Harry Flegle: Here's the good part. I have a lot of respect for fellow veterans that know if you go into a new place, you better listen to the people that's been there a while. They're going to help you 100 percent. After graduation, and by the way we took honor platoon and I was issued my dress blues and my saber and all that stuff, all the squad leaders and stuff were all issued that. We took honor platoon which was 318. In fact I tried to get a hold of the Marine Corps because I don't know what happened to my platoon picture that had all the guys I was with. My understanding is all of them are deceased but two of us. I'm not for sure because I don't know how to get a hold of them. When I went to Vietnam, things got pretty rough.

Tell us a little bit sir, because I know from talking earlier that you had mentioned you were awarded Silver Star and three Bronze Stars.

Harry Flegle: We'll get to that in a minute, and anyhow like I told you, after graduation, when we got back to the company area, he told me, he says I treated you worse than I treated everybody else. Of course I was the biggest man in the platoon, I mean pretty obvious. He says because I already know where you're going. Well basically they knew where everybody was going back then. That was the reason for drafting all the time. He says you make one hell of a target. I had to agree with that. I mean I'm not hard to miss. When I got over there, I found that out real quick. Buddy, I can dig a hole faster with a trenching tool faster than anybody you ever saw. I got hit once over there the first time, and then when I came back, I went back to San Diego because everything that he done to me there in basic started coming back, and soaking it in, actually soaked in what he was doing for me. So when I got back, I went back -

When he was still a drill instructor there at MCRD San Diego?

Harry Flegle: Yeah, he was. I think he's retired now, but his name was Elliot. The meanest looking man you ever saw, but I thanked him. I believe he actually saved me. OK, now Army. I liked the Army, too. It wasn't as rough as the Marine Corps, but the Army's got some special forces that are good. They were pretty, they did some pretty, well we did things that you wouldn't normally do, let's put it that way. Let me see, medals, well actually I got two Silver Stars. I got a Silver Star with Oak Leaf Clusters, I got three Bronze Stars with V Device, so you only get to one V Device with two Oak Leaf Clusters. I got three Purple Hearts with two Bronze Clusters, got eight Air Medals, two Army commendation medals, four Good Conduct medals – three from the Army, one from Marine Corps. Of course everybody gets a National Defense medal. I call it the butterball medal. You get that just for being in the service. And of course Vietnam service, and the campaign with Device with five Bronze Stars, got combat infantry badge, of course the expert rifle, automatic rifle M-60 and pistol, Ranger Tab, Air Crew wings, Jump wings, Air Assault badge, Jungle Expert badge, or it's just a patch, and I got four-year Reserve medal and 10-year Reserve medal.

Tell us a little bit if you would about the circumstances that led to you being awarded you said two Silver Stars?

Harry Flegle: Yeah, I only got, I couldn't find the other one, but I've got all my discharge papers here from Marine Corps, Army, Army National Guard, Army Reserves. You get a discharge every time you re-enlist, so I got a slew of them. Well I can read to you on the Silver Star thing if you want me to.

Yes sir, definitely, because that's definitely a very high honor to receive that.

Harry Flegle: I've only got, I could only find the two, the one for the Bronze Star and the one for the Silver Star. Well, a lot of my military, I used to have all my medical records, too, but I couldn't find any of them. I don't know what happened to them. Of course over the years, stuff gets shuffled around. So this one is dated, I don't know why it took them so long, 3 January 1970. OK, the following award is announced. I was an E-5 at this time. I was with Company A 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry, 25th Division. That's who I was attached to. Awarded Silver Star, date of service 29 August, 1969. Republic of Vietnam. Authorization by direction of the President under provisions of the Act of Congress to prove 9 July 1918. Reason: for gallantry in action against an armed hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam. Sergeant Flegle distinguished himself by intrepid action on 29 August 1969 while serving with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry. On that date, the company was conducting routine combat operations near – now when it comes to Vietnam names, I can't pronounce half of them. Axtron, when it came under intense hostile fire from an estimated battalion size enemy force. Well, I think it was a little bigger than battalion size. In the initial exchange of fire, several friendly casualties were sustained, and Sergeant Flegle immediately rushed forward to assist his fallen comrades. Repeatedly exposing himself to hostile fuselage, Sergeant Flegle swiftly moved about the battlefield and rendered first aid to his fellow soldiers until he was critically wounded. Despite his serious injury, Sergeant Flegle continued to treat his comrades and supervised the evacuation. I haven't read these in years. Evacuation operations ensuring that the most critical casualties were extracted first. At this time, he then moved across a widened, expanded area of open terrain to the side of his wounded platoon leader and helped carry the man to safety. Due to his timely courageous actions, Sergeant Flegle was highly instrumental in saving of lives of several fellow soldiers. Sergeant Flegle's personal heroism, professional competence and devotion in duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself in the 25th Division. Chief of Staff, T.H. Tackaberry, Colonel.

Sir, thank you for reading that to us because that is truly remarkable and heroic, and anyone who listens to this will be impressed by that. Obviously that is something that still changes your life forever. Can you tell us on that day how you were able to react the way you did? Was it your training? Was it some sort of instinct that kicked in?

Harry Flegle: I don't know. At the time, it just seemed like the thing to do. I call it young and dumb because if I had to go back today, with the age I am now and what I know now, back then you followed orders. You either followed orders or you were dead, and well there wasn't no orders to give because our platoon leader, he didn't die that I'm aware of, but he was in pretty bad shape and of course I wasn't in too good of shape myself. But I wasn't worried about me. I don't know. I just had the strength enough to keep going. That would that they're talking about, I was shot in the chest, well it went through my arm and into my chest, and to be honest with you, when it first happened, I didn't even feel it. It just felt like getting a shot from a needle. But after it was all over, then it started hurting a bit. You want to hear the other one?

Yes sir, I was going to ask, too, when that happens, in your case, sometimes I've interviewed veterans that talk about how time seems to slow down and things seem to be in slow motion.

Harry Flegle: It's definitely slow motion, yes. Well it seemed like it. Small arms fire like machine guns, you know, every clip round is a tracer. Well it looked like the whole area was just lit up because all I could see was tracer and I knew in between it was four hard rounds somewhere, but I wasn't worried about that. I mean I figured whatever is going to happen is going to happen. So I'm here and somebody upstairs must have liked me or I wouldn't be here. In fact, I did expire three times, not that time, but three other times, and they brought me back and I'm still here. I haven't figured out why yet, but I'm sure he'll let me know when the time comes. OK, the other one is dated 13 February 1970. Awarded Bronze Star medal for heroism. I was only an E-4 then. I don't even remember what rank I was. Rank didn't mean much to me either. I had a job to do and I did it to the best of my ability. Bronze Star medal with V Device. Date of action 15 May, 1969, Republic of Vietnam. For heroism in connection with military operations against a hostile force, Spec 4 Flegle distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions on 15 May 1969 in Republic of Vietnam. After six hours of intense fighting with an estimated North Vietnamese army battalion. Now there's a difference between North Vietnamese army and the regular Vietnamese. You know what I'm talking about? These guys were tough, well trained. Spec-4 Flegle's element was ordered to prepare for evacuation as soon as the last of the relief element was ordered landed. The priority of evacuation was to be the seriously wounded followed by the walking wounded and then the remainder of the element. Spec-4 Flegle completely supervised the evacuation of the wounded which included the platoon leader. See what I mean about platoon leaders? We couldn't keep platoon – I never, it didn't pay to learn anybody's name because they were never around long enough. After the wounded had been evacuated, additional helicopters landed to extract the remainder of Specialist Flegle's element. As they were landing, the enemy began bombarding the landing zone with mortar fire, increased their automatic weapon fire on the helicopters. A nearby helicopter was completely destroyed by an enemy mortar round. When he saw the remaining troops were loaded, Spec-4 Flegle boarded the aircraft. As the ship began to lift off, Specialist Flegle noticed the door gunner on his side of the aircraft was slumped over and he feared he would fall from the ship. He immediately reached and grabbed the stricken door gunner, and while holding on to the aircraft with one hand, moved the stricken door gunner into the passenger compartment. Once he had accomplished this, he leaped into the door gunner's seat and began returning fire on the enemy with the helicopter's machine gun. Safely out of reach of hostile fire, Sergeant Flegle

returned to the passenger compartment to administer first aid. He continued to administer first aid until the helicopter landed at the hospital and was accredited with saving men's lives, devotion to duty and personal courage were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army. That's it.

Yes sir. Again, thank you for sharing that citation with us. That instance happened before the Silver Star situation.

Harry Flegle: Yes. I got wounded in that one, too, but it was a scratch. That one didn't disable me a bit. Well in my opinion just stuck a bandaid on it, and we carried on.

Sir, I do again appreciate you sharing those with us. I know it's deeply emotional for you and understandably. Is there anything about those particular instances or any of your time in the service that you think you'd want people to know about or understand that may be listening to this interview?

Harry Flegle: Yeah, I think a lot of young men today, you know, everything, it's not, they don't have draft no more, so I think if they like that type of life that they should join the military because you can learn a lot. You can learn a lot about respect and honor, mostly about your country. To me, I did it for my reasons were probably different. My first reason was to get away from home. But the second reason was for my country because my father fought for my country and I figured I needed to, too. I'm glad I've done. I don't regret not one minute of it. I love the military. I always did. And even though I was in the Reserves, some of it was just by paperwork I was in the Reserves. I can't tell you why, but I was there but I wasn't there.

You were definitely there to earn those citations.

Harry Flegle: There's some of them I can't even tell you about, but I was places that we weren't hit places, otherwise if we got caught, we didn't exist. So of course that's all military denial of that anyway. You know how our government works. Well, that's all I can tell you right at the present time.

Well sir, again, I do appreciate you taking the time to talk to us and I know that Mr. Downs, the service officer there in Palo Pinto County will appreciate the fact, too, that you let us interview you because he really felt strongly that you were someone we should interview.

Harry Flegle: Well he never did tell me why.

I think he just felt like we try to get all veterans interviewed that we can, regardless of when and where they served. They don't necessarily have to be Auddie Murphy or any of that sort of thing, but –

Harry Flegle: Oh no, well, a lot of that now, don't get me wrong, Auddie Murphy was a good man, and he got everything he deserved medal-wise and probably then some. In a lot of ways, we got a fellow in our unit calls me Auddie Murphy. Of course if you count medals the only one I didn't get is the one that he got, and that's the highest one you can get. So I don't, I'm not worried about it.

What I mean though, sir, is we try to interview all veterans whether they are Auddie Murphy, Sergeant York, or they serve state side or never saw combat. We try to get all these stories to put

in our archives because they come together like a patchwork quilt to paint the overall picture for people and especially with fewer and fewer people percentage-wise serving in the military today, I think it's especially important that we capture these stories and that's why Commissioner Patterson started this program a few years ago.

Harry Flegle: I've heard that name before.

Yes sir, he's the Chairman of the Veterans Land Board and Commissioner of the Land Office which the Veterans Land Board is part of, and he's a Vietnam veteran himself, I'm a veteran, and still serving in the Reserves, so there's a lot of us here that understand what military service is about, but we do this to preserve these memories but also to thank veterans like yourself for your service to our country. It's just a small token of our appreciation by sending the CD's and the certificate and hopefully that others will hear these stories, too.

Harry Flegle: Well like I said, to me, it was mainly a job. Everybody whether they were in combat or not or even went overseas, what they do here is just as important to what's going on over there. That's the way I look at it. Just like a civilian job. Everybody's got a job to do and if it ain't done in a team manner, it's not going to work.

That's right, well anybody especially today in the military, if they raise their hand and take an oath to serve and that means a great deal, and where they go once they serve, it's up to the higher as to where exactly they go, but they are all –

Harry Flegle: I can vouch for that. It definitely is. Like I said, I don't know what he's got in mind for me yet. I don't get around much anymore because my legs don't work good and naturally my lungs, I'm on oxygen 24 hours a day, but I'm still a-kickin'. I ain't figured out why, but I'm still a-kickin'.

There's a reason for everything.

Harry Flegle: Yeah, I'm sure he'll let me know when the time comes.

Well sir, it's really been great getting to talk to you today and especially thank you for sharing those citations with us and I know that's not an easy thing for you to do, but it means a great deal to us.

Harry Flegle: Well it's tough, I don't like to remember that kind of stuff. Like I said, it took me five years to get over the initial. I still have dreams at night and stuff, but not near as bad.

Again sir, I do appreciate you taking the time to talk and share a little bit of your memories today and like I mentioned before, we're going to send you copies of this on CD, and as well as eventually we'll get you a nice letter certificate from Commissioner Patterson. It's just a small thank you for your service and sacrifice for our nation.

Harry Flegle: Oh, well thank you. I'm sure Mr. Downs is looking to hear from you.

Yes sir, I'll be sure to let him know that we had a great interview today. If you don't mind, if it's OK I'll send him a copy of this interview to him as well.

Harry Flegle: Yeah, that's fine. He would definitely probably want it.

Yes sir, I think he would. Well sir, I won't take up anymore of your time today, but I really to appreciate it. All right sir, have a good day and a good weekend.

Harry Flegle: You too, thank you very much.

[End of recording]